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ABSTRACT

This study of teacher characteristics investigated: (1) whether students construct a stereotype from the term "teacher" (a nonmodified concept); (2) the differences between this and a stereotype for "good teacher" (a modified concept); and (3) stereotype characteristics in the students' vocabulary. Three hundred high school students from five Salt Lake City high schools were asked first to list in five minutes all the one-word characteristics of a "teacher" they could think of. The procedure was then repeated for a "good teacher." The 35 most frequent characteristics were rank ordered for both terms. Results indicated totally negative stereotypes for the concept "teacher." Seventy-five percent of the students identified teachers as mean. Other terms were boring, unemotional, cold, humorless, and uncaring. The "good teacher" concept produced a strong positive stereotype with terms such as nice, warm, friendly, caring, and interesting. Teachers should be aware of these stereotypes when entering the classroom. "Good" teacher listings could be used for emphasis in teacher training and inservice teacher education. (BS)

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Stereotyping: "Teacher" and "Good Teacher" Characteristics

by

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An article submitted to the Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Association

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INTRODUCTION

Each autumn, thousands of teachers struggle with their identity as "teacher." Everyone of them wants to be a "good teacher," and each tries to find his/her version of what this term means.

These classroom teachers have often sought models to help them gain insight into the relationship between student learning and teacher behavior. History has provided us with many models for good, perhaps even great, teachers. Socrates, Christ, and Buddha represent varying points of view, and their individual contributions as teachers are undeniable. What was it about these teachers that made them great? From what kind of teacher do students learn best? What characteristics do good teachers have? Do students' perceptions of their teacher affect their attitudes about learning?

STUDY DESIGN AND RESULTS

For decades research has investigated which teacher characteristics contribute to students' cognitive learning and attitudes. No research has studied the possibility that perceived teacher characteristics could be subsets of larger systems of stereotypes.

Therefore, there were several purposes for this study. The first was to determine if certain students construct a stereotype (system of characteristics) of "teacher." The second was to discover if there was any distinction between possible stereotypes of "teacher" (a nonmodified concept) and "good teacher" (a modified concept). Third, the researcher wished to identify characteristics of the possible stereotypes in the students' vocabulary.

Phase one of the research was designed to facilitate the three purposes of this study. Since the first phase dealt with the concept of stereotype, it was necessary to determine what combination of characteristics constituted a stereotype. McLuhan (1970) suggested that two components had to exist: (a) the characteristics of the stereotype had to be accepted by a significant number of the population, and (b) there would have to be some kind of logical association among the characteristics. As with any stereotype, the pattern would be logical in association, but not necessarily representative of everyone in the group.

Data for this phase of the study were acquired by administering a survey instrument to 300 high school students from five different high schools in Salt Lake City, Utah. The students were drawn from these different high schools in an attempt to get a socioeconomic cross section. The first high school chosen was in an old, well-established community with students from the middle and upper class. The second high school was from a rural area that is rapidly turning into a suburban section. Its student-body was drawn from the middle and lower class. The third high school was located in a former industrial and rural area that has become suburban. The students in this area were drawn from all classes. The fourth school was located in an area that is relatively new. Its students are drawn from the middle and upper class. The last high school represented a cross section. The students in this school came from every social class, representing old money, new money, upper, middle, and lower classes. These five schools were equally divided into "eastside" and "westside" influence.

Within each school principals arbitrarily assigned classes for sampling, according to their availability during certain hours of the day. The approx-

imate size of each class was about 30. No other attempt was made to achieve a more representative sample.

The person administrating the survey was unknown to the students, and was introduced as a "researcher," not as a "teacher." Their own teacher was not present. All students were given the following directions:

1. List as many one-word descriptions or characteristics of a "teacher" as you can think of in the next five minutes.

The students were told that the description could be personality, physical, or any other characteristics they thought of during this period.

Immediately following the five-minute response period, the students were given a second task:

2. List as many one-word descriptions or characteristics of a "good teacher" as you can think of in the next five minutes.

When the data were compiled from the two tasks, an effort was made to combine words and phrases which appeared to be equivalent in meaning. For example, "no sense of humor" and "humorless" were both represented by the single word, "humorless."

After words and phrases were combined, rank order was established according to frequency of occurrence. A rank order list was then compiled from the 35 most repreated characteristics from both the "teacher" (Table 1) and "good teacher" (Table 2) responses.

Next, a one-way analysis of variance was used to determine if there were any significant differences among classes of students (F (9,299) = 2.93, $p < .08$). An analysis of variance was used to test for any significant differences among the cumulative characteristics scores of the schools involved in the study, (F (4,299) = 5.8, $p < .07$). There were no significant differences among groups or schools.

Table 1

Rankings of Characteristics from Most Frequent to Least Frequent for the "Teacher" Stereotype

1.	Mean	19.	Doesn't know how you feel
2.	Boring	20.	Unaware
3.	Old	21.	Suspicious
4.	Unemotional	22.	Demanding
5.	Unfriendly	23.	Unyielding
6.	Cold	24.	Uninformed
7.	Unenthusiastic	25.	Inconsiderate
8.	Humorless	26.	Closed
9.	Female	27.	Critical
10.	Uncaring	28.	Discouraging
11.	Rigid	29.	Intolerant
12.	Quiet	30.	Doesn't listen
13.	Unfair	31.	Uncreative
14.	Unreachable	32.	Illogical
15.	Insincere	33.	Conservative
16.	Biased	34.	Passive
17.	Doesn't have a social life	35.	Lazy
18.	Impatient		

Note. The reader should note that this data when compiled failed to yield one positive characteristic with more than a 2% consensus.

Table 2

Rankings of Characteristics from Most Frequent to Least Frequent for the "Good Teacher" Stereotype

1.	Nice	19.	Considerate
2.	Warm	20.	Encouraging
3.	Friendly	21.	Has a social life
4.	Caring	22.	Compromising
5.	Interesting	23.	Fair
6.	Sense of Humor	24.	Logical
7.	Enthusiastic	25.	Tolerant
8.	Informed	26.	Uncritical
9.	Listens	27.	Empathetic
10.	Young	28.	Liberal
11.	Trusting	29.	Aware
12.	Reachable	30.	Pliable
13.	Accepting	31.	Creative
14.	Ambitious	32.	Active
15.	Sincere	33.	Talkative
16.	Unbiased	34.	Emotional
17.	Open	35.	Male
18.	Patient		

In addition to the preceding analysis, a percentage table was constructed to indicate the consensus of response for each characteristic (Figures 1 and 2). For example, in Figure 1, the term "mean" was used by 75 percent of the students as a characteristic describing "teacher." The figures not only demonstrate the degree of consensus for each characteristic, but pattern of association for the "teacher" and "good teacher" stereotypes.

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND SUMMARY

The first phase of this study focused on three purposes: (a) To determine if certain students construct a stereotype (system of characteristics) of "teacher," (b) To determine any distinctions between possible stereotypes of "teacher" and "good teacher," (c) To identify characteristics of the two possible stereotypes in the students' vocabularies.

The first task of phase one produced several results. First, a stereotype of "teacher" was found in the students' responses. Students reached a consensus on characteristics within that stereotype. There was also a logical pattern of association that emerged between the characteristics listed by the students. The stereotype characteristics for the concept of "teacher" were overwhelmingly negative, for example, "mean," "boring," "unfriendly," and "cold." Some words like "old" and "female" are not negative per se, but carry connotations that are often negative in this society.

Another disturbing finding was the degree of consensus for the negative stereotype. In Figure 1, 75% of the students identified the number one characteristic of a "teacher" as "mean." Because these were open-ended responses given in response to a neutral term or concept like "teacher," the stereotypic pattern was clear. When one also considers that all the negative characteristics on Figure 1 were free responses and none has less than a 3.5% rate of agreement, the overwhelmingly negative pattern was well demon-

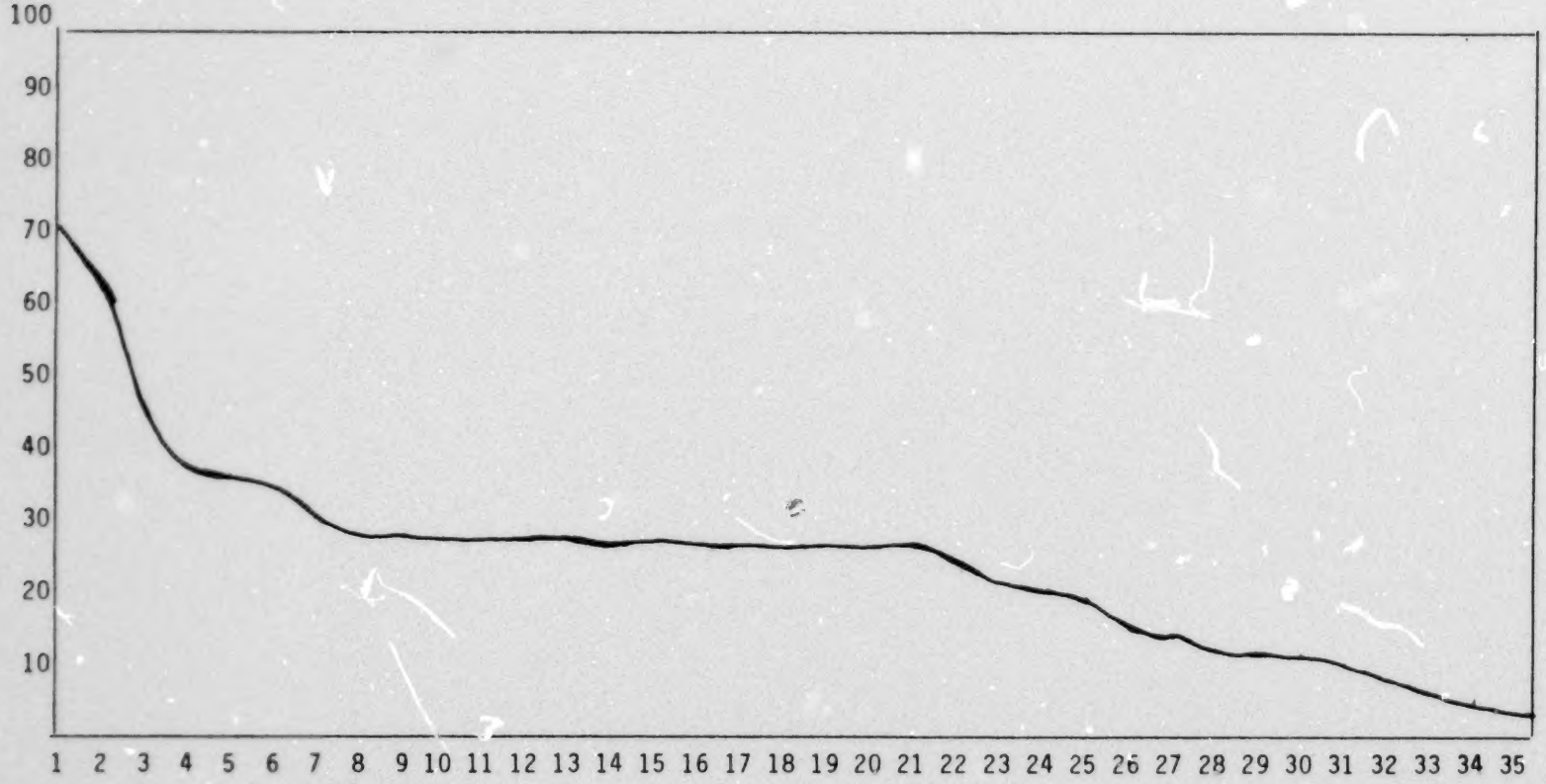

Figure 1. Descriptive characteristics for concept "Teache ," percentage of students selecting.

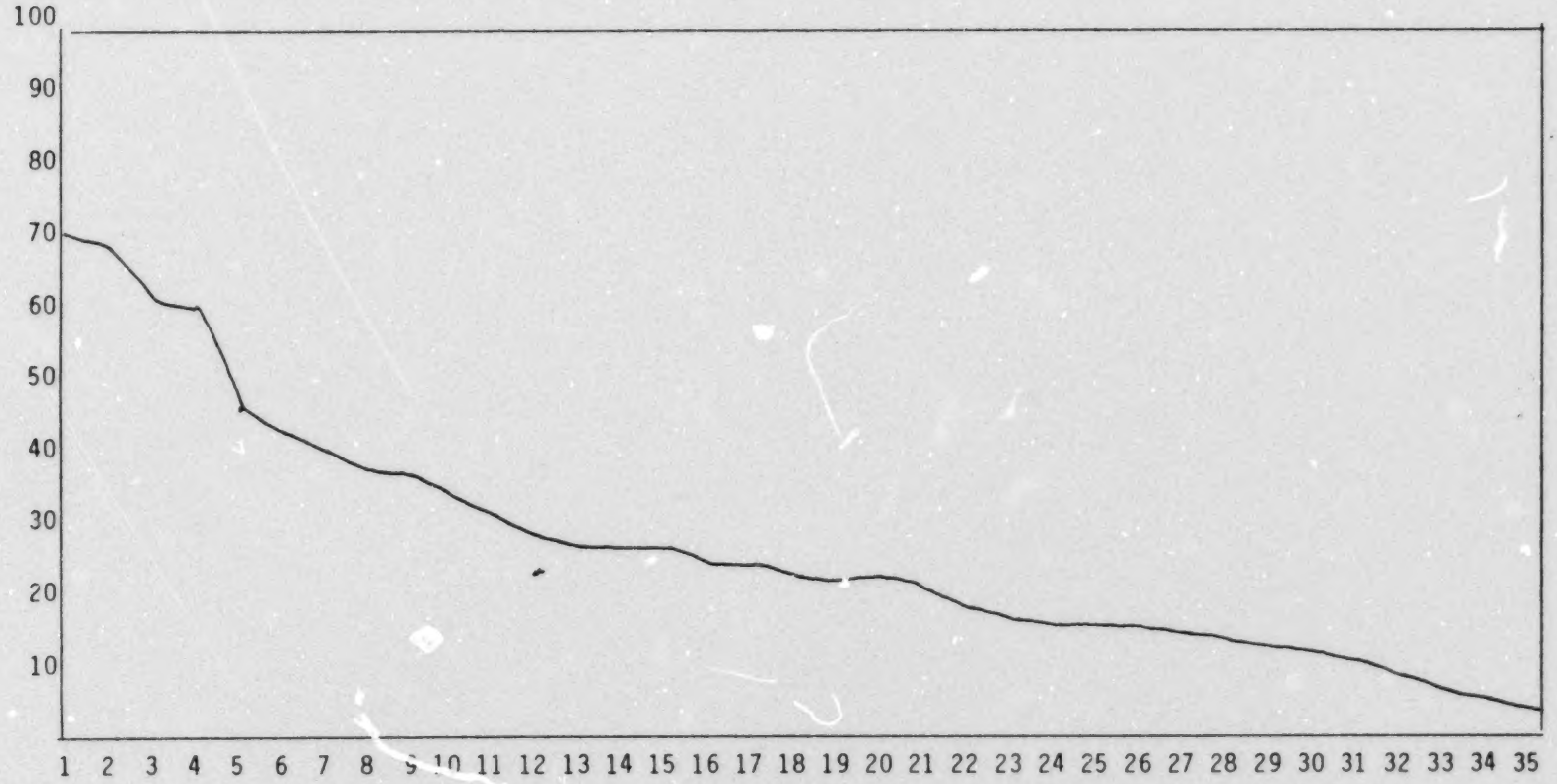

Figure 2. Descriptive characteristics for concept "Good Teacher," percentage of students selecting.

strated. This discovery is the focal point of this study. The overwhelmingly negative stereotype associated with "teacher" has to create barriers between students and teachers that hinder the educational process. Since all learning is both affective and cognitive, a stereotype of such negative dimensions would have a detrimental influence on a student's emotional domain.

Furthermore, not one positive attribute received sufficient endorsement from the students to make the list. A comparison between the "teacher" category and the "good teacher" category further illustrates the negative nature of the "teacher" stereotype. As expected, "good teacher" responses did not list any negative qualities. "Good teacher" is a modified term, and by adding the word "good," the modified term becomes value laden. However, "teacher" is a neutral, nonmodified term and one would not expect all of the characteristics assigned to this concept to be negative.

In the first phase of the study there were no preconceived lists of characteristics from which to choose. The students freely associated negative words with the concept of "teacher," but did not choose to associate negative words with the concept of "good teacher." This type of word selection further supports the negative connotation of the "teacher" stereotype.

Just as general association and word choice supported the notion that there is a negative "teacher" stereotype, the data indicated that the term "good teacher" represented a strong positive stereotype. Words like "nice," "warm," "friendly," and "caring" describe this positive association pattern. Further, word choice seems to reinforce this stereotype. Words like "unfair" and "mean" are included on the "teacher" lists, but they are excluded on the "good teacher" lists. Finally, the "good teacher" concept has a better overall consensus as a stereotype.

The implications of these findings are many. (The most obvious one is simply informative.) Teachers should know that when they enter any classroom, they will most likely deal with a stereotypic pattern. Further, they should assume that this pattern is overwhelmingly negative. The second implication is that the stereotype of "good teacher" spells out characteristics of a well-liked teacher. Although the stereotype is value laden, it serves as a model for desirable attitudes for a successful teacher.

The third implication is that the characteristics established for both "teacher" and "good teacher" could be useful in selecting and/or evaluating new teachers, existing staff, or student teachers.

The final implication is that the "good teacher" listings could be used for emphasis in teacher-training and inservice classes. For example, with these stereotypes in mind, university instruction could be directed towards the utilization of methods which aid the teacher in breaking down the negative characteristics (i.e., contract methods of grading appear to the student to be more fair; discussions would make the teacher seem more talkative, etc.).

Further research could be directed toward ways to break down the negative "teacher" stereotype. Perhaps such investigations could help break down the barriers that stereotyping creates.

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